

Legends of Lower Gods

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The Rice Thieves

THE WARM DAYS were over at last and the season of long rains would soon be at hand. "It's time to fill the bin with clean white rice against the rainy days," the old wife told her husband. "Do bring out for me a *pungo* from the granary before you leave for the fields in the morning."

He was a quiet old man and made no reply, but at cockcrow before he set out for his plowing, he opened the granary and brought out a big bundle of rice beads.

While her pot of rice was cooking in the clay stove, she fed the pigs with bran and boiled *kangkong* and the chickens with grain. She swept the yard with a broom of bamboo twigs while her ginger tea was brewing. Then she roasted a dried fish over the red coals, and she had breakfast.

Soon the sun peeped over the mountains. She untied the *pungo* and separated the six fistfuls of smaller bundles—the *bettek*—it was made of. In the fenced-off strip of turf the chickens could not get into, she stood the *bettek* on end like big brown flowers. The rice heads in the heart of each *bettek* were crisp and dry by midmorning, and then she overturned the *bettek* to sun the outer heads, too.

In the afternoon after a wink of a nap she carried the *bettek* to a hollow log under the kitchen. She chose

a pestle and laid one bettek in the log. She held down the bettek with one foot and pounded the grains loose, unerringly hitting them rather than her big toe.

Soon all six bettek were threshed and she put the grain in a basket. With cool, caressing long notes she whistled for the wind. It came like a docile beast in due time, and she winnowed out the chaff with the wind's help. Then she pounded the grains in a wooden mortar three coconut bowls of grain at a time. That took a good part of the afternoon, for it was a tedious task and she often had to pause for breath. When she had done, she took the winnowing basket and sifted out the bran for the fowls and pigs. Then she whistled for the wind again and had it help her throw out the chaff by tossing the pounded grain into the air with a shallow basket.

The woman had a hard day, but she felt good when she poured the hulled rice carefully into the bin and it filled more than half of that. She put a chopping block over the mouth of the bin and set about cooking supper.



"Bring me down another pungo in the morning early," she asked her husband when he came home from the fields. "The bin will be filled before you get home tonight."

He brought down a second pungo. She dried the six smaller bundles of rice heads from it and then threshed, pounded, and cleaned them. But when, expecting to fill the bin, she poured the rice in, the rice got up to only the bin's shoulder.

She leveled the rice carefully with her hand and covered the bin's mouth with the chopping block.

"The pungo do not seem to be big enough this year," she told her husband in the evening. "Do bring down another pungo from the rice house early in the morning. The grain from it should certainly fill the bin and leave me some for my immediate cooking needs."

She dried, pounded, and cleaned the rice from the third pungo, but at sunset when she slid the rice into the bin, the bin was still unfilled.

"Someone has been stealing rice from this bin," she thought. She leveled the clean rice, placed a shiny brown bowl face down on it, and put the old chopping block over the mouth of the bin. But very early next day, as soon as her husband rose to pick up his things and set out for the fields, she lighted a torch of straw. She held the torch close to the foot of the ladder, and sure enough, on the soft earth were footprints. They were as tiny as those of babies. She followed the prints and saw that the lighter ones pointed to the bagbagutot bush, known to be the stairway of the elvish *ugaw* to the big *bulala* tree hard by the river. Over them lay heavier prints, and they pointed away from the bush.

The old woman tiptoed to her bin. The chopping block still covered its mouth, but the coconut bowl had been pushed to one side and there was less rice there than when she left the bin the evening before.

It was clear. The feet of the *ugaw* were known to be set wrong end forward. The light prints pointed away from the ladder and so the creatures must have

walked to the ladder empty-handed. Since the wee folks' heavier footprints pointed to the ladder, they had left the house laden with the rice they had stolen from her bin.

She pounded a fourth bundle of rice the next day. She poured the clean rice into the bin as before. She placed the coconut bowl face down on top of the rice and set the block over the bin's mouth. But meanwhile, her husband had made a quick trip to the seaside. There he filled his pockets with little white shells and strung them on a twine. She hung the string of shells around the neck of the bin and the shells made a jingle when shaken. When the little folk came to steal rice from her bin, they would brush against the shells by accident, making the shells ring. The sound would remind them of the salt from the sea, and of salt they were in great dread.

No wee folk ever came to steal rice from the old woman's bin after that.

Woman Elf by a Tree

PITONG RAN out to the fields and flew his kite near a tree that stood by a brook. The kite rose to the sky and the sun painted its wings a light red. It sat as still as a sleepy old woman in a corner up in the sky.

By and by the breeze rose and a sudden gust blew over. The kite pointed its nose to the ground, dived, and got itself caught in a branch of a tree.

Now the tree was a *bangar* and was the favorite home of elves. People never walked by the tree for fear of offending the elves there. The ground under the tree was always swept clean, it was said, by the elves living in the tree.

But Pitong said he did not believe in elves or any other creature he had never seen. He climbed into the tree and then, stepping on a branch to reach out for his kite, he heard a little cry of pain. "*Aray! Araay!*" it said.

He saw too late that he had stepped on an old woman about three spans tall. She had long, copper-colored hair, long nails, and a wrinkled—if fair—skin. She was eating her supper of yellow roots and black rice when Pitong stepped on her.

She scratched him and bit him and spat on him, but Pitong fought her back. Her nails and teeth were sharp, however, and at last he leaped to the ground and ran home shouting for help.

He lay in bed with a high fever all night. Before sunpeep, his father went to call for an old woman who lived alone in a grove at the outskirts of the village. She clucked her tongue when she heard what had happened. She ordered a white-feathered, white-legged cockerel caught and then cooked it with soft white rice. She put no salt or spices in the dish. She placed it all in a bowl of polished coconut shell. Then she took the shell to the foot of the elf tree at sun-dip and chanted:

*Take this our toll
For the harm our son did.
Eat and forgive.*

By morning Pitong's fever had gone down and he was soon at play again. But he never flew his kite near the elf tree after that.